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How Surprised Was McNamara?

Assessing the Chinese H Bomb

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It was typical of Robert S. McNamara that when he learned of Communist China's first hydrogen bomb test he sent for a file of his prior public appraisals and predictions concerning Peking's nuclear development program.

There were bound to be assertions that the test on June 17 in China's Sinkiang province caught American intelligence by surprise, though in fact the evidence available today suggests that the reverse is true, thanks to a revision in estimates in recent months. There was bound to be new concern about the pace of Chinese progress and the time when a "significant" threat could be expected. Was this still to be the mid-1970's?

With the file of past statements in hand, the Secretary of Defense made a comparison with latest analyses and projections of United States intelligence agencies, including data from the latest fateful explosion. And he concluded, no matter how contrary or noisy the comments from Capitol Hill, that his estimating since 1964 has been good enough to require no current alteration.

No new appraisals having been made publicly since the 2-to-7 megaton explosion, it is worth-while to look again at what McNamara has said about the timing of China's emergence as a nuclear-armed power and the relationship to American defense programs.

The real military question is *when*—few believe it any longer is *whether*—the United States will will build an anti-ballistic missile system, that incredibly complex array of radar, nuclear-tipped missiles and computers, for protection against a Chinese attack. Even though such an attack were most improbable, the Chinese might be able to use a token force of intercontinental missiles as a threat to America, intended—as McNamara has said—to undermine the credibility of our defense commitments to friendly countries nearer China than we are. A missile defense system could negate Chinese threats if Peking understood [illegible] system would surely defend America.

Naturally enough, then, members of Congress were quick to reiterate their demands that the Administration get on with building the missile defense system, now that China has demonstrated a hydrogen bomb small enough to be dropped from an aircraft. This by no means indicated that the device was small enough for a missile warhead, but it had to be regarded as a major milestone in development progress.

Even one of the calmest congressional voices, that of Representative Mahon (D., Texas), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, held that, while there was no reason to panic, "we can't dawdle."

The essence of McNamara's position—which depends vitally on the accuracy of American intelligence concerning China—is that the construction of a missile defense adequate to the Chinese threat can be carried out faster than the Chinese can develop, test, produce and deploy intercontinental ballistic missiles. Consequently, it is wrong to say he opposes a missile defense against China. (He does believe such a defense would be futile against the gigantic, highly sophisticated type of attack of which the Russians would be capable, just as he believes the Russians can mount no successful defense against America.) He believes the issue of building a "China defense" does not have to be faced yet, and that time is thus available for continued improvement of the Nike-X system on which, along with the earlier Nike-Zeus, the nation has spent $2,700,000,000.

The defense chief's assessment, therefore, remains as it was stated to Congress last January:

"With regard to an ICBM, we believe that the Red Chinese nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs are being pursued with high priority. On the basis of recent evidence, it appears possible that they may conduct either a space or a long-range ballistic missile launching before the end of 1967. However, it appears unlikely that the Chinese could deploy a significant number of operational ICBM's before the mid-1970's, or that those ICBM's would have great reliability, speed of response, or substantial protection against attack."

McNamara said a ballistic missile defense system, offering a high degree of protection against attack from China, would cost $3,500,000,000. With "modest" additional expenditures ten or more years hence, this system could keep potential damage to low levels well beyond 1985.

Another of the Secretary's evaluations, cited by defense officials as still valid, was given to NATO ministers in Paris in December, 1965. At that time China had set off its first two nuclear explosions (there now have been six, including the hydrogen bomb), one a 20-kiloton shot on a test tower, the other a 40-kiloton airborne device.

McNamara estimated then that, in the following two years, China could produce the fissionable material for a modest test program and for stockpiling a "small number" of atomic weapons. A medium-range ballistic missile possibly could be operational as early as 1967, with several launchers deployed by 1968 or 1969 and several dozen by 1976. Initial deployment of an intercontinental missile could come as early as 1975—an estimate now somewhat changed, with recognition that there could be a significant number by the mid-1970's. Also, there would be material to make bombs for aircraft delivery.

He told his NATO colleagues China was not then a power that could challenge the alliance, but [illegible] its future—and, in view of declared Chinese intentions, this was "not a pleasant prospect for [illegible]"

Where McNamara comes i conflict with his critics, then, is the issue of how soon the Chin nuclear arsenal will develop, t is, on how far to go in relying intelligence estimates; and h much time is left before the a ballistic missile system must built.

The Secretary no longer spea of Chinese nuclear devices "primitive," as he did after the fi explosion in October, 1964, nor sa it will take "years and years" develop successful short-range m siles, as he said at that same tim

But he is unchanged in his op ion, as defense officials clea stated last week, that the dang period is unlikely to come befo the mid-1970's and that the decisi to build a missile defense does n have to be made now.

The outlook is that this issue w be faced in the preparation of t next defense budget, which will submitted to Congress next Jan ary and will cover the year sta ing July 1, 1968.